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Do You Recall If That Food Was Recalled?

By Melanie Reynolds

Mangoes and melons and sprouts, oh my!

Who knows what dangers lurk in the deep, dark corners of the grocery aisles? Why, public health, of course!

Millions of foodborne illnesses occur each year in this country when people eat or drink contaminated food. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that one in six Americans is sickened by something they consumed. About 3,000 people died of foodborne illness in 2011.

More than 75 percent of shoppers believe food-related illness is a serious threat to their health, according to the Partnership for Food Safety Education.

In recent years, widespread foodborne outbreaks seem to have become more common, in part due to improvements in the way public health officials identify them. Many of these outbreaks have led to widely publicized food recalls. Mangoes and cantaloupes, for example, were in the news recently because of potential contamination from the bacteria *Salmonella* and *Listeria,* respectively.

Of course, the ultimate goal is not just stopping outbreaks once they occur, but preventing them from happening in the first place. At the same time, public health and food safety officials must be as sensitive as they can to the potential economic impacts on food producers and sellers.

Finding Foul Food

Many government agencies are involved in preventing, tracking, and stopping foodborne illnesses. The CDC, with information supplied by local and state health departments, monitors disease outbreaks and looks for links to specific food products. When a link is established, the CDC notifies the federal Food and Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) if the product is meat or poultry or the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) if it's any other food.

Government agencies may trace foods to their origins, test foods, assess food-safety measures in restaurants and food-processing facilities, lead farm investigations, and announce food recalls.

Historically, food recalls have been conducted voluntarily by the food industry, sometimes with pressure from the FDA or FSIS. But with adoption of the federal Food Safety Modernization Act in 2011, the FDA was given the authority to issue mandatory recalls. The agency has not yet implemented this new authority.

Gastronomic Gumshoes

The first step in controlling an outbreak of foodborne illness is detecting it in the first place. It's easy to miss an outbreak involving dozens or hundreds of people if they're spread out over many counties or states.

One way public health officials find these outbreaks is through "surveillance." By gathering reports of illnesses in their communities all the time, they know what's "normal." If an unusual number of people gets the same illness at about the same time, officials investigate to see if there's a common cause.

The Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department gets calls from county residents reporting suspected food-related illnesses. Doctors are also required to report foodborne illnesses to us.

If we can identify the source of an outbreak, our sanitarians may do an assessment to find out how the food was contaminated. If the people who got sick ate food prepared in only one kitchen, it's likely the contamination occurred in that kitchen. Sanitarians may interview the people who prepared the food to find out what ingredients they used, how they prepared it, and the temperatures at which they cooked or stored it. They may look at the health practices and training of the workers and at the cleanliness of the kitchen.

If the outbreak is linked to food prepared in a number of different kitchens (like hamburgers from many restaurants in the same chain) or to a food that could be purchased at many stores and eaten without further preparation (like peanut butter), it's likely that contamination happened somewhere else in the food production chain – possibly in another state or country altogether.

The local health department reports this to the state health department, which reports it to the CDC.

Do You Recall?

Once a food is found to be the source of illness, officials may need to implement control measures right away. If contaminated food stays on store shelves, in restaurant kitchens, or in home pantries, more people may get sick.

Officials may:

- require food-facility operators to discard contaminated food;
- recall food items that have entered the distribution system;
- tell the public how to make the food safe or to avoid it completely;

- tell consumers to throw away the suspect food or return it to the store from which they bought it;
- close a restaurant or processing plant temporarily; or
- require food facilities to clean and disinfect their premises.

To Mango or Not to Mango

Recalls can be scary and confusing for consumers. Often, recalls pertain only to specific batches of foods or to specific producers. A mango recall, for example, may affect only those grown by a certain company or shipped to a specific store chain.

So how are consumers to know whether that mango at the grocery store is safe to eat?

One way is to monitor food recalls. You can do so by visiting www.recalls.gov, where you can sign up for e-mail notices or a mobile app. Just be forewarned that numerous recalls are issued every day, and most won't affect you.

Another way is to ask your friendly grocer. Many local stores notify customers through signs on their shelves or personal letters if a product they carry has been recalled. To learn how to dispose of recalled food, visit www.befoodsafe.org/what_to_do.

Ultimately, through improved food industry practices, better consumer understanding, and diligent public health surveillance and investigation, we should be able to reduce the number of foodborne illnesses. Then we can shop our grocery aisles with greater peace of mind.

September is National Food Safety Month. Learn more at www.foodsafetymonth.com.